



United States Association of Reptile Keepers

March 12, 2022

Re: National Advocacy Opposition to House Bill 5293

Members of the Connecticut Joint Committee on Environment,

The United States Association of Reptile Keepers (USARK), a 501(c)(6) non-profit national advocacy, appreciates the opportunity to submit this opposition on behalf of our many Connecticut members to House Bill 5293 (HB5293). We work to provide education through fact and legitimate science with government agencies across the country. HB5293 is titled *AN ACT PROHIBITING THE USE OF WILD OR EXOTIC ANIMALS IN TRAVELING ANIMAL ACTS*. The bill's stated purpose is "To prohibit the use of wild and exotic animals in traveling circuses." However, the title and stated intent are deceptive and do not fully inform as to the reach of the bill. As a reminder, Connecticut legislators sensibly chose to not pass this same bill (formerly SB413) in 2020.

With a misleading title, broad language, and at times vague definitions, this bill is being peddled as a means to protect animals which may be suffering abuse in traveling circuses. If passed into law however, HB5293 presents egregious overreach, and would create many unintended consequences. This bill does not just place a ban on iconic elephants and tigers traveling in circuses, nor is it remotely limited to circus acts.

This bill will affect many important animal activities in Connecticut. Licensed and reputable educational outreach organizations throughout the State will be impacted, since most will not qualify for the bill's very limited exemptions. This bill will even make it illegal for responsible animal owning citizens to provide educational services and presentations to schools and Scout troops. HB5293 is bad government policy and it is bad for the people and animals in Connecticut. This bill demonizes lawful animal educators whose programs will qualify as "traveling animal acts."

To emphasize just three of the major problems with HB5293:

1. The definition of "performance" would ban educational talks with a tortoise or gecko (and most animal species) to children at a school or library, for example. This bill even bans the exhibition of many animals at 4-H and state fairs. These programs are beneficial to animals, people, and communities, but would be squashed if this bill becomes law.
2. Connecticut already has animal welfare and cruelty laws, including CGS § 22-329 Chapter 435, which more than adequately addresses any legitimate acts of cruelty that HB5293 claims to address. Enforce current laws instead of overreaching through this misguided effort. Punish the criminals and not the animal educators. Travel and exhibition with animals are not inherently cruel.



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3. Thousands of animal species will be banned from educational outreach and other programs, which would readily fit the bill's description of a "performance." As written, the bill is aimed at, "but not limited to" a list of broad animal descriptions. The featured sample list of species banned in these programs is nothing more than a guise meant to hoodwink the reader. Effectively, programs including any non-domesticated animal will be banned. These animals are not harmed by their travels, nor by the outreach programs.

While on the surface this bill seems well-intended, it does nothing to help animal welfare or to stop animal cruelty. Instead, this bill will deny many people the opportunity to have unique and educational animal encounters. Rather than its asserted intent, it will harm our planet by significantly curtailing both awareness of wildlife concerns and appreciation of our natural world promoted by these programs.

To expand on the exemption dilemma, per the bill (*italicized text below*), only those who qualify under one of the extremely inadequate exemptions below could continue these efforts:

- A. *any environmental education program* is exempt **only if** *administered by any entity:*
 1. *accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums,*
 2. *engaged in falconry in accordance with the provisions of section 26-67e of the general statutes, or*
 3. *permitted by the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection.*
 - i. And even those "exempt" in 1-3 above have further restrictions.

If you are unaware, Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) facilities are the largest and most well-funded zoological institutions. While they do conduct educational programs at their public attractions, they are not doing most of the educational outreach programs witnessed at schools, libraries, Scout meetings, and other places. AZA-accreditation is unobtainable to those without these large, public facilities.

To add further insult to the misleading campaign led by those supporting HB5293, at least one Connecticut legislator has misrepresented this exemption for educational programs. As you can plainly perceive from the explanation above, most legitimate educational programs would not be able to continue.

Please take heed and be cognizant of the unintended consequences of this bill. HB5293 infringes on the rights and freedoms of responsible animal owners who provide education regarding their animals to tens or hundreds of thousands of Connecticut residents annually. Do not lump the credible services provided by educators into the same classification as acts of animal cruelty. Responsible educators provide excellent husbandry and devotion to their animals.

The educational animal outreach events which will be banned by HB5293 currently allow children to actually see animals in person. These programs are more vital now than ever in today's world of urbanization, destruction of forests, and endangered species decimation due to the snowballing human population. There are many ways to learn about animals, but seeing them through these types of programs



leads to much greater appreciation, while fueling the desire to learn in ways that books or videos alone cannot achieve.

Along with cultivating a deeper respect, live animal presentations often inspire children to conserve animals and their habitats, and seek out related careers. The unique experiences with animals offered by these devoted animal caregivers have proven to be one of the most effective ways to foster personal investment and empathy for our natural world. Where will tomorrow's conservationists, biologists, veterinarians, and ecologists come from without these experiences to activate their interest?

Traveling and teaching with animals is not in any way inherently cruel when done responsibly. Ambassador animals featured in educational presentations that are kept under human care by respectable wardens are not living a life of suffering, as radical activists fallaciously claim.

USARK is a fierce advocate for responsible animal ownership. It is unreasonable to punish those engaging in conscientious animal husbandry and outreach with such a misguided attempt to crack down upon those who are negligent. This bill is redundant, and a waste of Connecticut taxpayers' money and the valuable time of legislators.

Please contact stakeholders and legitimate subject matter experts (not those providing misinformation to push this bill and advance their agenda) for any factual information regarding these programs and "exotic" animals. I implore you to do what is right for Connecticut, the animals, and your constituents by stopping HB5293 dead in its tracks. Thank you for your time and have a good day.

Sincerely,
/s/ Phil Goss
President of USARK
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More about USARK:

USARK is a registered 501(c)(6) non-profit national advocacy protecting the freedom of Americans to responsibly keep reptiles and amphibians. We are a science, education, and conservation based non-profit membership organization. We represent pet owners, conservationists, business owners, veterinarians, and scientists who work with reptiles and amphibians. We are the only national advocacy representing solely the reptile and amphibian keeping community, and true subject matter experts. We also work with legitimate animal welfare organizations regarding other animals.

USARK is dedicated to species conservation through responsible captive propagation, and endorses a Keepers' Code of Ethics. We regularly provide science-based education to government agencies and officials at the federal, state, and local levels. Our voice is critical when it comes to forming government policy. Too often this arena is filled with those who are uneducated regarding animals and pushing an agenda to end all forms of private animal ownership.